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ELISHA H. GREGORY

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ON Sunday, February 11, 1906, there passed away at Ormond, Florida, at the age of eighty-two years, Dr. Elisha H. Gregory, for more than fifty years a resident and surgeon of St. Louis.

Dr. Gregory was born in Kentucky of parents descended from old Virginian stock, and the period of his education antedated that prescribed by Oliver Wendell Holmes for that of a gentleman. His seventeenth year found him living with his parents in a northern Missouri town, apprentice to a printer, and studying medicine from borrowed books at the same time. Two years later he attended a course of lectures in Louisville, and shortly after his return he was married to the life companion with whom many of us were acquainted.

The doctor's early efforts in the city were marked by the same energy which he had displayed in the country, and success came early. He made but one effort for a political appointment and afterward commented many times upon the ultimate failure of the more successful candidate. In the days when to be a surgeon meant more than the possession of a little technical skill such talent and energy as his brought him rapidly to the front.

The doctor was justly proud of his success. While it had its foundation in well regulated energy directed toward good, this simple man had many special qualities that added greatly to it. First and foremost, he seldom made a mistake in the estimation of a man's worth, and while he was sometimes tolerant beyond the limits of charity, I have seldom seen him misplace a trust. He had a trick of knowing when to act without asking questions, which, besides constantly saving him much time, was responsible for his surgeons'hip in the Mulvanphy Hospital. Another habit to which he, himself, attributed much of his success was his ability to be on time for all his engagements; and he considered his meals not the least of these. Physically, he was not a strong man, but the habit of care which this engendered is probably responsible for the length of his useful life. It was the doctor's wont to refer to himself as unsophisticated, but he who acted on this idea was liable to make grave mistakes.

In questions of medical ethics he was almost always on the right, if not always on the successful side, and his policy has seldom been questioned. For years as a medical expert he was held in the greatest esteem, a terror to the

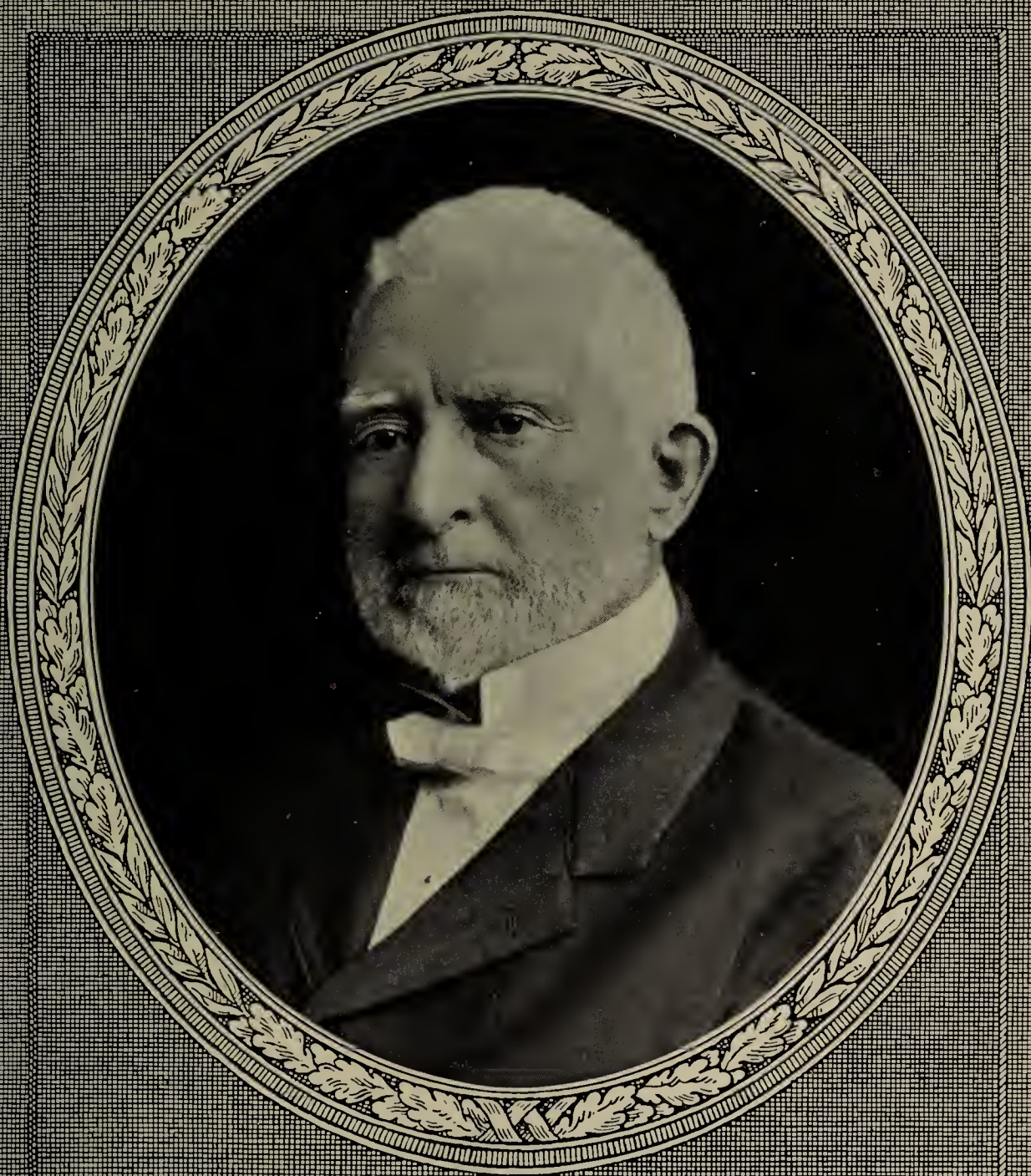
evildoer, but more often a Godsend to the well intentioned medical brother who had been placed in a false or questionable position. He placed justice higher than friendship, by which he at times incurred ill-advised criticism.

I think his greatest talent was for teaching, or at any rate I am sure he was the greatest medical lecturer we have had. Here his concise knowledge, his pure logic, and his enthusiastic love of his subject combined in an effect that carried away both himself and his listeners, yet he has often said that he was extremely diffident about speaking in public and always avoided it when he could. This was not true about lecturing to medical students. He understood them and felt that they understood him. He liked to talk to them, and he put in his best work in the preparation of these lectures. He knew and loved each of his students, followed their careers with intense interest, and took the greatest pride in their success—and was given real pain by their occasional failures. There is no doubt that his teaching and working for the medical students was his greatest pleasure outside of his domestic life. He taught in the St. Louis Medical College and the Medical Department of the Washington University for fifty years; when he resigned it was with the protestations of his associates and students in the full possession of his powers and faculties.

Next to his students he loved his books. Not all books nor many books but those that tried to deal honestly with Nature in any of its phases either of mind or matter. He had an excellent library; most of the books were interlined and annotated by himself, and next to those whom he considered the masters of medicine, his favorite author was Shakespeare.

Of the number of offices that came to him I would mention just two. It was many years ago, while on the City Board of Health, that he succeeded in having the medical management of the City Hospital taken from political control—to which condition it has unfortunately since relapsed; and St. Louis once had the honor of seeing him president of the American Medical Association.

Dr. Gregory was essentially a surgeon, a safe operator, and an exponent of that greater surgery that recognizes Nature as the Master, a master not to be insulted by ill-advised interference. He operated unhesitatingly when he judged it necessary, but when there was a question he “gave the patient the benefit of the doubt” and waited a little longer. He hated mutilation of the human body to the point of passion and never did more than was necessary. Though he looked upon the advent of antiseptic surgery with much the same emotions as must have come to the patriarch of old when he gazed upon the promised land, still never an enthusiastic operator, the antiseptic technique, possibly because untrue, was irksome to him and before many years he began slowly but surely to withdraw from active practice. Every minute gained in this way was devoted to study, unhampered by the distractions of practice, until in his old age he was marching along in front of the procession of knowledge.



ELISHA H. GREGORY
1824-1906

The great engrossing study of his life to which the latter years were entirely devoted was the subject of inflammation. With the older surgeons he had known it in all its forms and in all its manifestations, and yet as to its cause and its underlying processes, for the greater part of his life he could but guess. Can it, then, excite wonder if, after spending two-thirds of his life working in the dark, when Pasteur and Virchow and other such luminaries did add their light to his, he should have chosen to stop, to gaze on, and to revel in the illuminated landscape which his efforts had helped to light up, and with which he had become familiar while groping in the twilight of dawn? His address as president of the American Medical Association was at the time hardly accepted, yet today it contains but mere commonplace facts; while his final paper on "Inflammation" showed that he still maintained his advanced position.

There will be many tributes to his memory, but none will be given with more sincerity than this—that he was a simple man leading a simple life, seeking truth for its own sake, and doing good because it was right.

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